

Students' Preferences and Attitude toward Oral Error Correction Techniques at Yanbu University College, Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

Error correction has been one of the core areas in the field of English language teaching. It is “seen as a form of feedback given to learners on their language use” (Amara, 2015). Many studies investigated the use of different techniques to correct students’ oral errors. However, only a few focused on students’ preferences and attitude toward oral error correction techniques, which determine students’ success in language learning. This quantitative research explored teachers’ and students’ preferences as well as students’ attitude toward the use of oral error correction techniques in the language classroom. The participants of the study were English language students and English language teachers at Yanbu University College (YUC) in Yanbu Industrial City, Saudi Arabia. A classroom observation checklist and questionnaires were used to collect the data. The study findings revealed that recast and explicit correction are the preferred techniques by the majority of the students and teachers. The findings also indicated that students have positive attitude toward oral error correction. As the classroom observation revealed that recast was highly used by teachers, it is recommended that teachers should also use other techniques to correct students’ oral errors. In addition, it is recommended that before correcting students’ oral errors teachers should always take into account the purpose of the activity and the proficiency level of students.

Keywords: oral error correction, corrective feedback, error correction techniques, learners’ attitude

1. Introduction

Correcting students’ errors, which are considered indisputable, is significantly important as errors help in telling the teacher about the progress of the student, what needs to be taught further and what strategies the student use in learning. Oral corrective feedback plays a significant role that cannot be ignored in second and foreign language learning. However, oral correction is a very controversial issue in this regard. Perspectives toward errors have gone from the extreme of non-acceptance and preventing them at all cost, to more permissive perspectives in which errors are seen as part of the language development. Moreover, learner’s attitude is another factor that has a major role in the learning process. Cndlin and Mercer (2001) explained learners’ attitude as the learner’s perception of the language, its speakers and the learning context. They also claimed that learner’s attitude can determine learner’s success or failure.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

There is growing evidence that error correction is overall useful and can be helpful in learning a language (Ellis, 2009). However, some English language teachers at the tertiary level in Saudi Arabia do not use oral error correction in the classroom to improve students’ oral performance. Some teachers lack the knowledge of the importance of oral errors correction and the correct way to interfere to correct learners’ oral errors in the classroom. Hence, the researchers decided to conduct this study, hoping it sheds light on the importance of this topic.

1.2 Purpose of the Study

The aim of this study was to explore students’ preferences and attitude toward oral error correction techniques used in the classroom by English language teachers at Yanbu University College in Yanbu Industrial City, Saudi Arabia. A second aim was to compare students’ preferences and attitudes to teachers’ preferences and the decision they make in the classroom. Hence, this study sought to answer the following questions:

- 1). What are students’ preferences and attitudes toward classroom oral error correction techniques?

2). What are the teachers' preferences for oral error correction techniques?

1.3 Significance of the Study

This study is suggested to be important to English language teachers as it gives insights to implement techniques to correct students' oral errors in the classroom. The study will also be of benefit students as it sheds light on students' attitudes classroom oral error correction techniques which play part in explaining and determining their success or failure.

2. Review of Related Literature

2.1 Oral Error Correction

In linguistics, there is a diversity between the definition of errors and mistakes. A distinction between mistakes and errors was suggested by Brown (1994) who states that a mistake is a result of failing to use a known system correctly. It includes slip of the tongue and random ungrammatical formations which can be made by both the native speakers and second language learners. However, those mistakes can be corrected immediately since the correct form is known by the speaker. On the other hand, an error is a result of the learner's lack of proper grammatical knowledge. Therefore, it occurs repeatedly and it is not recognizable by the learner until it is corrected by teachers and others who are aware of the possible grammatical deviations.

Although the majority of teachers would agree on the importance of error correction in learning a language, they would disagree on many aspects related to the correction. They have to consider several factors influencing it and decide on what type of error to correct, what technique to use for correcting, when to correct and who should correct the error.

2.1.1 Types of Errors

The first decision a teacher needs to take is to decide on the type of error to be corrected. Hendrickson (1978) divided errors into global errors and local errors. Global errors hinder communication and prevent the listener from understanding what does the speaker mean. Second type is local errors, which do not prevent understanding because context provides clues to what does the speaker mean. However, global errors are generally seen as more disturbing than local ones. Therefore, global errors must be corrected since they hinder communication and prevent the listener from understanding the message. In addition, most frequently errors should be given priority in correcting (Brown, 2000).

2.1.2 Accuracy and Fluency

Once an error is identified as a candidate for correction, the teacher needs to determine the best time to correct the error so that the correction will stick and be helpful to the learner. According to Ellis (2009), a teacher has two choices, either to correct the error immediately or after a speaking activity has finished. Immediate correction is generally preferred by methodologists in activities aimed at accuracy. Bartram and Walton (1991) state that accuracy activities are such activities that encourage students to make their utterances as native-like as possible – which is usually taken as necessitating more intense correction. On the other hand, fluency errors encourage students to communicate using the language, rather than being accurate, for the purpose of developing students' motivation to speak (Tomkova, 2013). Therefore, teachers should give the students the chance to experience uninterrupted meaningful communication. In this case, immediate correction can be harmful. Instead of correcting the student immediately, the teacher can note down the errors that has occurred during fluency activities, and deals with them after the activity (Brown, 2007).

2.2 Techniques for Oral Error Correction

Most teachers of English language agree that using oral error correction in the classroom supports the learning process (Edge, 1989). Nevertheless, they wouldn't agree on the techniques to use to correct an error. Lyster and Ranta (1997) conducted one of the most important studies in this area. They investigated oral error correction techniques used by teachers in the classrooms and identified six techniques of oral error correction used by teachers:

- 1) Recast – saying the correct expression without commenting on it or explaining it.
- 2) Repetition – repeating the error, usually with rising intonation or stress.
- 3) Clarification request – indicating that the utterance was not understood.
- 4) Explicit correction – explicitly providing the correction.
- 5) Elicitation – attempt to elicit the correct form from the speaker.

6) Metalinguistic feedback – using technical linguistic explanation of an error.

Lyster and Ranta (1997) reported that recast was highly used by the teachers. A number of researchers (Lin, 2009; Panova & Lyster, 2002) used Lyster and Ranta's (1997) model of oral error correction techniques to investigate the use of these techniques by English language teachers around the world. Lin (2009) investigated the use of the six techniques by English language teachers in low, intermediate, and advanced level speaking classrooms. The finding of his study indicated that recast was the most frequently used technique by the teachers. This finding is supported by the study by Panova and Lyster (2002) in which recast was highly used by teachers in early-intermediate adult ESL classrooms in Quebec.

2.3 Learners' and Language Attitude

Learners' attitude has a major role that influences language learning (Karahan, 2007). Longman's Dictionary of Contemporary English defines attitude as a way of feeling or thinking about something which influences one's behavior toward it. From a psychological point of view, attitude was first defined as a mental state of readiness to respond to something based on experiences toward a specific object such as language (Allport, 1935 as cited in Ali, 2012).

Moreover, a language attitude is specifically related to the language, the native speakers of the language and the learning process. According to Richards, Talbot and Weber, language attitudes are defined as follows:

‘The attitude which speakers of different languages or language varieties have towards each other's' languages or to their own language. Expressions of positive or negative feelings towards a language may reflect impressions of linguistic difficulty or simplicity, ease or difficulty of learning, degree of importance, elegance, social status, etc.’

Learners' attitudes toward learning may have an impact on the learning outcome (Cotterall, 1995). In an opening statement, Finch (2000) states that most successful learners develop a positive attitude toward the learning process. This positive attitude is a result of their insightful beliefs about the effective learning strategies that enhance the learning process. Likewise, Savignon and Wang (2003) argue that the ultimate success in learning language depends on the attitude of the learner. Thus, learners' attitude toward the learning process cannot be ignored.

3. Methodology

3.1 Type of the Research

This quantitative research was conducted to explore error correction techniques that were preferred by students at YUC. A questionnaire was developed by the researchers to elicit techniques that are preferred by teachers to correct students' oral errors. Another questionnaire was developed to elicit students' preferences and attitudes toward oral error correction techniques that were used by their teachers. A classroom observation checklist was also used to record down the oral correction techniques used by the participating teachers in the classroom.

3.2 Participants

The participants of the study were 84 female students studying English; in addition to 13 female English language teachers who were teachers of English at the Applied Linguistics Department, Yanbu University College. The students' median age was 22 and Arabic is their first language. They were randomly selected from all Applied Linguistics students from different levels (freshmen, sophomore, junior, senior).

3.3 Research Tools

Data were collected by using two tools, namely: students' and teachers' questionnaires and classroom observation checklist. The first tool was a teachers' questionnaire; a five-point Likert scale (1 = "Always", 5 = "Never") was used for all items. It contained five sections with a total of 20 items: Section 1 has one item which aimed to investigate how often teachers correct students' oral errors, Section 2 to know about the types of oral errors to be corrected (1a-f), section 3 for immediate correction (3a-c), Section 4 for delayed correction (4a-c) and Section 5 to know about the techniques teachers prefer to use when correcting oral errors (5a-g). The second tool was the students' questionnaire; a five-point Likert scale (5 = "Strongly Agree", 1 = "Strongly Disagree") that was used for all items. It contained seven sections with a total of 30 items: Section 1 has one item which aimed to investigate how often students receive correction for their oral errors, Section 2 to know about students' feeling when they are corrected by the teacher (2a-h), Section 3 to know about students' points of view regarding the expectation and effectiveness of oral error correction (3a-b), Section 4 for types of errors to be corrected (4a-f), Section 5 for immediate correction (5a-c), Section 6 for delayed correction (6a-c) and Section 7 to know about the techniques students prefer to receive when producing oral errors (7a-g). The third tool was a classroom observation checklist used when observing teachers to record the techniques they use in the classroom.

3.4 Procedure

A questionnaire was developed for 20 English language teachers. Only 13 gave back their questionnaire papers. Three teachers' lessons were observed. The content of the classes observed included speaking and discussions about topics in the textbook. A questionnaire was given to the students in the classroom that were observed. The researcher gave a brief introduction about the importance of oral error correction to students. Although the questionnaire itself had extra explanations, some points were mentioned and explained to the students so that they could respond to them easily. Also, some points about error correction and different methods of correction were presented to the participants. The learners were given 10 minutes to fill the questionnaire. The questionnaire was collected by the researcher. After the questionnaires were collected, the data were analyzed and the results were interpreted.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Students' and Teachers' Questionnaire

The following tables and graphs show the results of students and teachers questionnaires. The results of the two questionnaires were analyzed and compared.

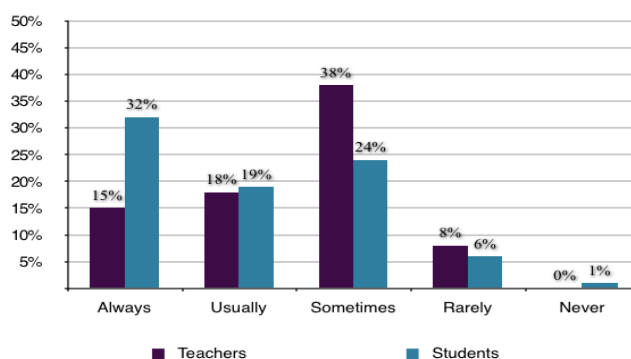


Figure 1. How often do teachers correct students?

Figure 1 demonstrates that 32% of students reported that they were always corrected for their errors in the classroom. Interestingly, some students reported different frequencies of correction. This result suggests that a) their teacher corrected some students more frequently than others, or, b) some students have higher level of proficiency, which to a certain extent, prevents correction. It could also mean that students see correction differently, thus report it differently.

On the other hand, teachers reported different frequencies of correcting students' oral errors. Only 15% of teachers report that they always correct students' errors and 38% usually correct oral errors. Surprisingly, 8% rarely correct oral errors, which may suggest that either the teacher has a lack of knowledge about oral error techniques and how they are important in the learning process, or the teacher is more concerned about conveying the meaning. Thus, it does not matter to her whether there is an error or not as long as the meaning is clear and comprehended.

Table 1. Students' Emotional Reaction

Emotional reaction	Students				
	5	4	3	2	1
Angry (%)	5	5	17	44	30
Embarrassed (%)	12	35	24	21	8
Sorry (%)	7	30	16	26	9
Happy (%)	22	48	16	13	9
Satisfied (%)	3	8	32	33	23
Bothered (%)	3	14	38	36	9
Indifferent (%)	3	14	38	36	9
Nervous (%)	8	24	23	27	18

Table 1 shows that less than half of the respondents feel nervous; only 10% correct them feel angry and nearly half of the students feel embarrassed when the teacher corrects them in the classroom. This could be a result of mixed level classrooms in which some students are very good while others are weak. The latter, most of the time, feel intimidated by those who are good, which results in feeling nervous and embarrassed. Interestingly, the majority of students feel happy and not angry when they are being corrected. These results indicate that students understand the importance and effectiveness of oral error correction.

Table 2. Expectation and effectiveness of oral error correction

Views about correction	Students				
	5	4	3	2	1
Expected (%)	24	48	19	10	0
Effective (%)	40	47	7	4	1

Table 2 indicates that students have a positive attitude toward oral error correction since the majority of students thinks it is expected and effective. This result is supported the study by Azar and Molavi (2013), in which they point out that many students expect their errors to be corrected and they feel disappointed or resentful if they are ignored.

Table 3. Students' and teachers' preferences about immediate correction

Immediate Correction	Teachers' preferences and actions					Students' preferences				
	5	4	3	2	1	5	4	3	2	1
All types of error(%)	10	50	0	10	30	40	37	11	8	4
Accuracy errors(%)	30	20	50	0	0	28	42	15	13	2
Fluency errors(%)	20	10	60	10	0	28	48	9	15	0

Table 3 shows that only 10% of the teachers always provide immediate correction for all types of errors. This result shows that errors that affect accuracy are the most common type of errors to be immediately corrected by teachers. Moreover, the table shows that the majority of students prefer immediate correction for all types of errors including fluency and accuracy errors. However, teachers sometimes have no time for doing so. From a practical point of view, it is impossible for teachers to correct all types of errors immediately, particularly in conversation classes where the focus is fluency. This view is supported by Ellis (2009) in which he suggested that accuracy errors must be corrected immediately while fluency errors should be delayed.

Table 4. Students' and teachers' preferences about delayed correction

Delayed Correction	Teachers' preferences and actions					Students' preferences				
	5	4	3	2	1	5	4	3	2	1
All types of error(%)	20	0	10	20	50	27	45	14	8	6
Accuracy errors(%)	0	50	30	10	10	19	39	22	17	3
Fluency errors(%)	0	20	50	20	10	13	39	26	21	2

Table 4 indicates that 72% students prefer delayed correction for all types of errors. On the other hand, only 20% of the teachers provide delayed correction for all errors. 50% of teachers usually provide delayed correction for accuracy errors and sometimes they correct fluency errors. This finding is inconsistent with Bartram and Walton (1991) who suggested that accuracy error should be immediately corrected while fluency errors should not indulge in immediate correction. Only 10% of teachers never use delayed correction for fluency errors. A possible explanation is that they may provide immediate correction or they do not correct fluency errors at all.

Table 5. Students' and teachers' preferences about what type of error to be corrected

Delayed Correction	Teachers' preferences and actions					Students' preferences				
	5	4	3	2	1	5	4	3	2	1
	Always				never	Strongly agree				Strongly Disagree
All types of errors(%)	10	20	10	20	40	39	38	11	11	1
Most frequent errors (%)	40	50	10	0	0	27	36	27	11	0
Global errors (%)	60	10	20	10	0	10	38	34	18	0
Local errors (%)	10	10	20	30	20	8	25	38	25	3
Accuracy errors (%)	40	20	40	0	0	32	39	22	3	2
Fluency errors (%)	20	20	10	40	10	35	38	18	5	3

Table 5 shows that the majority of students want to be corrected for all types of errors including accuracy errors and fluency errors. It appears that students understand that all errors are equal in their importance so they want to be corrected for all errors. On the other hand, 40% of teachers never focus on all types of errors. However, most frequent errors, accuracy errors and errors that hinder communication are the most common types of errors to be corrected by teachers. This finding is supported by Hendrickson (1978) and Brown (2000) in which they stated that most frequent errors, global errors and accuracy errors should be given priority in treatment.

Table 6. Students' and teachers' preferences toward oral error correction techniques

Correction Techniques	Teachers' preferences and actions					Students' preferences				
	5	4	3	2	1	5	4	3	2	1
	Always				never	Strongly agree				Strongly Disagree
Recast (%)	10	30	50	10	0	35	42	13	10	0
Explicit correction (%)	10	40	20	20	0	13	57	22	6	1
Repetition of Error (%)	0	10	40	30	0	25	40	21	6	6
Elicitation (%)	0	30	30	20	0	19	39	33	9	0
Metalinguistic feedback (%)	0	10	50	10	20	14	47	30	8	2
Clarification Request (%)	30	20	50	0	0	20	43	25	12	0
Ignorance (%)	0	0	30	20	50	5	25	27	13	30

Table 6 shows that recast and explicit correction were considered helpful by the majority of students. While approximately 60% of students reported that repetition of error and clarification request are helpful techniques. elicitation and ignoring were the two least preferred techniques. This finding is supported by AlFaki (2013) in which the participants considered ignoring as an unhelpful technique. On the other hand, clarification request and explicit correction were the most preferred techniques by teachers. This finding is inconsistent with Lyster and Ranta (1997) study in which they found that teachers did not often use clarification request. Moreover, explicit correction and elicitation can also be considered as techniques that are highly preferred by teachers. Ignoring was of a very low usage. This is also in line with Lyster and Ranta (1997) who reported that ignoring was rarely used by teachers.

4.2 Classroom Observation Checklist

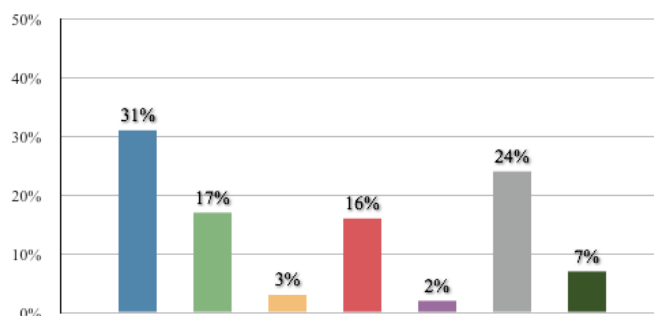


Figure 2. Techniques that are used by teachers in the classroom

Figure 2 shows that recast and clarification request were the most frequently used techniques. Surprisingly, there is a technique the researchers did not include in the observation but it was highly used by teachers, which is peer correction. Teachers might ask other students to correct the error to increase the participation of students in the classroom. However, there is a difference between the frequency of using recast and other techniques by teachers; namely repetition of an error and metalinguistic feedback. This could clearly indicate that teachers prefer to use one technique over another.

The results of this research were obtained from two questionnaires and a classroom observation checklist. These tools were designed to find out students' attitude and preferences toward oral error correction techniques used by English language teachers at YUC. The findings indicated that students have a positive attitude toward oral error correction. Therefore, they want to be corrected for all types of errors. The majority of students and teachers preferred recast and explicit correction.

5. Conclusion

The current study revealed various similarities between teachers' and students' preferences for oral error correction. It also revealed various discrepancies related to types of errors to correct and the time for correcting. The findings indicated that students have a positive attitude toward oral error correction. Therefore, they want to be corrected for all types of errors. The majority of the students and the teachers preferred recast and explicit correction. Based on these results, it is recommended that teachers should take into account the purpose of the activity to decide when and how to correct an error. In addition to the purpose of the activity, teachers have to take into account the proficiency level of each student. For students with low level of proficiency, the teacher should only focus on fluency errors so that students can develop meaningful communication. On the other hand, with students with high level of proficiency, who are already fluent, the teacher should focus on accuracy errors. As it is reported by the classroom observation that recast was highly used by teacher, it is recommended that teachers should also use other techniques to correct students' oral errors. As this research reveals students' positive attitude toward the correction of oral errors, a study is needed to explore the relationship between students' uptake and its impact to the language learning. Further a replicated study is needed with different population of different proficiency levels, in which it can be investigated whether or not the finding of the current study can be generalized to a wider population of EFL students. In addition, a study is needed to draw attention to students' uptake, which is a student's immediate response that follows the teacher's correction (Lyster & Ranta, 1997). Such a study will reveal students' responses to oral error correction in the classroom and it will indeed uncover the techniques that are more effective in the development of the students' oral production.

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